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ABSTRACT

The reactions of social studies educators to "A Nation at Risk," the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education that examined the quality of education in the United States, are discussed. The survey was an informal one that asked educators, mainly teachers and professors, what their reactions were to the report in general and to the five areas of recommendation (high school curriculum content, standards and expectations, time, teaching, and leadership and fiscal support) in the report. While some respondents questioned the information gathering process used for the report and the lack of teacher input, almost all agreed that education, including social studies, has problems. Social studies educators generally supported recommendations for requiring three years of social studies for high school graduation. They called for a national framework for social studies education, as well as new teacher education standards. Many felt the report ignored current research related to time on task, rather than time in school. Research findings need to be applied to teacher education. Respondents indicated a need for leadership in the field. (RM)

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THE SOCIAL STUDIES AND "A NATION AT RISK"

ERIC Digest No. 13

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ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education

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THE SOCIAL STUDIES AND *A NATION AT RISK*

In August 1981, Department of Education Secretary T.H. Bell created the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The charge to the Commission was "to examine the quality of education in the United States." The Commission responded to the charge in April 1983 with the report, *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform.*

What Is the Risk?

The report begins with an often-quoted and alarming statement, "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war." (p. 5) Stressing that the United States stands to lose its prominence as a world leader, the report indicates that we risk the long-standing promise "that all children. . .can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself." (p. 8)

Findings and Recommendations

The findings and recommendations of the Commission center on high school curriculum content, standards and expectations, time, teaching, and leadership and fiscal support.

Content. The Commission recommends a more rigorous four-year high school course of study founded on the "New Basics," which would include three years of social studies.

The Commission's stated goals for high school social studies are that the courses "enable students (a) to fix their places and possibilities within the larger social and cultural structure; (b) understand the broad sweep of both ancient and contemporary ideas that have shaped our world; (c) understand the fundamentals of how our economic system works and how our political system functions; and (d) grasp the difference between free and repressive societies. An understanding of each of these areas is requisite to the informed and committed exercise of citizenship in our free society." (pp. 25-26)

Standards and Expectations. Recommendations are for more rigorous and measurable standards, increased college admission requirements, and a nationwide (non-Federal) system of achievement testing.

Time. The Commission recommends increased homework, a seven-hour school day, and 200-220 day school year.

Teaching. Recommendations call for (1) high standards of teacher preparation; (2) competitive teacher salaries; (3) career ladders indicating beginning, experienced, and master teachers; (4) recruitment of non-teaching persons to meet shortage areas; (5) incentives to attract top students to the teaching profession; and (6) use of master teachers in designing teacher education programs and in supervising probationary teachers.

Leadership and Fiscal Support. The Commission recognizes that states and localities have the prime responsibility for school governance and finance.

Social Studies Educators Respond

In the past few months the staff of ERIC/ChESS has (informally) asked social studies educators for responses to the National Commission Report. Included were the clearinghouse advisory board members, members of the Board of Directors of the Social Science Education Consortium, attendees at the 1983 annual meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies, and other social studies educators in ERIC/ChESS workshops.

The following questions served to focus social studies educators' responses: (1) What is your general reaction to **A Nation at Risk?** (2) With respect to the social studies, what responses do you have to the five areas of recommendation in the Commission Report?

General Reactions

There was little disagreement that education has problems, and that social studies education has its share. In light of this and all the current reports on education, there was agreement that *now* is the time to begin the upswing in social studies education. Social studies professionals felt that more vision, more commitment, and more advocacy are needed.

It was consistently pointed out that the Commission report suffered from an appalling lack of input by teachers. Several questioned the process by which information for the report was gathered. Many wondered how the commissioned papers and individual reports related to the public report.

Critics disagreed that a primary goal of education was to enable people to fit into business and industry. This goal seems to ignore important affective aspects of the educational enterprise. Some thought that the report suggested a totalitarian, paternalistic view of education rather than a democratic view. Also, many suggested that the "more" syndrome—more time, more teaching—ignores current research.

Reactions to Recommendations

Content. Social studies educators generally felt supportive of the recommendation for three years of social studies for high school graduation. Many felt that the current content pattern in social studies is fragmented and that no clear "compass setting" exists.

Standards and Expectations. One workgroup, given the recommendation for national achievement testing, suggested a national framework for social studies education

This fact sheet was prepared by James E. Davis, Associate Director of the Social Science Education Consortium, Boulder, Colorado.

so that students graduating from high school would be exposed to similar content at similar levels. The group, however, felt that specific performance standards should be set at the local level. The same group recommended that colleges and universities, in cooperation with schools, set minimum standards for teacher training. Areas for consideration include content preparation, student teaching performance, and continuing education. All professionals responding indicated the need for consistent, ongoing, mutually agreed upon teacher and administrator evaluation criteria and procedures.

Time. Many felt the Commission Report ignored current research related to time on task, rather than time in school. There was strong sentiment for the elimination of the Carnegie unit. The argument is that the unit is time, not competency, based. By continuing with the Carnegie unit, it was felt that students would merely do more of the same for a longer period of time. It was recommended that student competency be measured without regard to time in class/school.

Teaching. Almost to a person, social studies professionals felt that social studies teaching included too much read/recite/regurgitate. There was little disagreement with the report's recommendations concerning preparation, salaries, and incentives to attract top students. Many felt that until some significant changes could be made in contracts with school districts, little could be done with respect to contract length, differentiated staffing, and use of non-teaching persons in shortage areas. The master teacher concept met with some approval, especially with respect to local curriculum development. It was strongly recommended that means be found to apply more systematically research on teaching to teacher training and continuing staff development.

Leadership and Fiscal Support. Generally it was felt that there is no absence of talent in the profession, but there are few charismatic people to champion social studies. It was recognized that the field of social studies is not being advocated as a basic area of learning. Many respondents felt that people in the profession need to take on advocacy in a startling way, making specific, public claims for the social studies as a basic and important area of study.

What Does the Research Say?

A continuing problem in all of education, not just in the social studies, is the continuing lack of attention to messages from research. In this writer's view, we can make progress only if we pay attention to research, especially that research which helps to identify problems. Once we know what the problems are, we can begin to take steps to correct them.

Presented briefly below are six problems in the social studies which were identified in the recently completed research synthesis project, Social Studies Priorities, Practices, and Needs (SPAN), conducted by the staff of the Social Science Education Consortium and ERIC/ChESS.

1. **Student Learning.** Many students leave school without the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are important and desirable outcomes of social studies programs. In addition, many students do not like or value social studies as much as other subjects.

2. **The Culture of the School.** The culture and organization of schools, especially at the secondary level, focus much of the energy of teachers and administrators on matters of management and control rather than on the teaching and learning of social studies—particularly the teaching and learning of higher-level thinking skills, participation skills, and democratic values.

3. **Teaching Practices.** Instruction in social studies is generally characterized by lack of variety in teaching methods and evaluation practices, by limited kinds of learning experiences, and by inattention to the implications of educational research.

4. **Curriculum.** The social studies curriculum—courses, materials, and content—is focused primarily on specific facts and broad conclusions from history and other social science disciplines rather than on critical thinking skills, social science concepts, values and attitudes, and social participation. The curriculum, moreover, is not based on student developmental needs and does not emphasize important societal issues and effective participation in the social world.

5. **Profession.** Parts of the social studies profession, in varying degrees, are characterized by considerable disagreement on the most important goals and objectives of social studies and by a decided lack of direction, satisfaction, opportunities for professional growth, and constructive interaction among the various participants.

6. **Public Support.** There is insufficient public support for and understanding of social studies programs that are balanced, judicious in responding to special interests, supportive of democratic values, scientifically and educationally sound, and relevant to the present and future lives of students.

It is easy to criticize the critics, and many, including social studies educators, have done so. Recent comments in the literature from education professionals indicate that the recommendations of the **Nation At Risk**, as well as other commissioned report recommendations, stand little chance of being implemented. Are we to hide behind our criticism of the reports, or can we say, "Perhaps we have some problems, let's see what the research tells and how we might go about finding solutions."

References

ED 226 006 **A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform,** by David P. Gardener and others, National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983.

ED 221 449 **Social Studies in the 1980s,** edited by Irving Morrissett, 1982. Consisting of selected and condensed portions of the Project SPAN series, this summary volume takes a brief look at the history of social studies reform, describes the current state of programming and instruction, recommends actions, and proposes an alternative approach to curriculum organization.

ED 218 202 **Working Papers from Project SPAN,** 1982. This collection includes papers developed during the three-year course of Project SPAN. Topics include evaluation, student learning and attitudes, change processes, and influences on social studies programs.

ED 218 201 **Social Roles: A Focus for Social Studies in the 1980s,** by Douglas P. Superka and Sharryl Hawke, 1982. An extensive rationale is presented for using the roles of citizen, worker, consumer, family member, friend, member of social group, and "self" as the basis for organizing a social studies curriculum.

ED 218 200 **The Future of Social Studies: A Report and Summary of Project SPAN,** 1982. This report analyzes six basic problems facing social studies in the 1980s and suggests desired states to which professionals in the field might aspire.

ED 218 199 **The Current State of Social Studies,** 1982. This volume contains reviews and analyses of the status of social studies rationales, goals, and objectives; curriculum organization and materials; teachers; and teaching practices.

ED 211 429 **Social Studies Reform: 1880-1980,** by Hazel Whitman Hertzberg, 1982. The author chronicles national reform movements in the social studies, identifies proponents, and describes their effects.